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Committee on Conferences
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Agenda item 3 (d)

Translation related matters: Implementation of relevant paragraphs of resolution 52/214

Note by the Secretariat

1. At its fifty-second session, the General Assembly adopted resolution 52/214 of 22 December 1997 on "Pattern of Conferences", in section B of which it expressed a number of concerns with regard to translation related matters, and requested the Secretary-General to take certain steps to meet those concerns. This report to the Committee on Conferences has been prepared with a view to providing the Committee with information on the current situation in those areas of concern and on the related action by the Secretary-General.

I. Suspension of some publications in all official languages

2. Under paragraph 10, section B of resolution 52/214, the General Assembly expressed deep concern about difficulties experienced by some Member States owing to the suspension of some publications in all official languages and the delay in the translation of official documents; under paragraph 11, the General Assembly decided, in this regard, to request the Secretary-General to provide all necessary resources to reverse this situation.

3. The publications policy of the United Nations was last the subject of a comprehensive review under the direction of the Publications Board in 1993. The findings of that review are contained in a report submitted to the General Assembly at its forty-eighth session (A/C.5/48/10). The respective roles of the entities responsible for establishing and implementing the publications policy are described in that report. While it is pointed out that Conference Services provides a variety of services related to the processing and distribution of publications, including translation, major responsibilities rest with the Publications Board, as it carries out policy-making coordination and supervision functions; the Department of Public Information, which not only creates and prepares information materials for the media and the general public, but also has primary responsibility for the planning and the management of the publications programme of the United Nations; the

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Programme Planning and Budget Division; and the author departments, which are responsible for the formulation of their own publication programmes on the basis of mandates from the relevant intergovernmental bodies and for the inclusion in the programme budget proposals of related resources.

4. In general, the issuance of publications in multiple languages is determined in accordance with the following principle: reference works, such as the *Disarmament Yearbook* or the *World Economic and Social Survey*, are published in all six official languages, while other publications, in particular those of a current, sectoral or technical nature, are produced in the languages of the target audience, as determined by the author department. The budgetary provisions for translation of publications included in the publication programme approved by the Publications Board are made centrally, currently under section 1 B, Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services, while other publications, including public information materials, are budgeted under the respective budget sections of author departments.

5. Before September 1995, the translation into mandated languages of all publications included by the Publications Board in the annual publications programme of the Organization has taken place in strict implementation of the requests originating in the author departments. However, the severe cash-flow crisis that struck the Organization in the second half of that year led to a number of emergency measures aiming at minimizing cash outlays. One of these was a total embargo on contractual translation of publications, which made it possible to re-channel the limited cash resources available to the processing of parliamentary documentation. The embargo was subsequently lifted as the cash situation of the Organization improved, and the policy that prevailed prior to September 1995 had been fully reinstated by January 1997. In the meantime, however, a significant backlog of publications awaiting translation had built up, resulting in considerable delays in the issuance of the translated versions. By and large, the backlog has now been eliminated.

6. In connection with the preparation of the present report, an informal survey of author departments on the subject of the suspension of some publications in all official languages has been carried out with the assistance of the secretariat of the Publications Board. Most of the respondents mentioned the embargo referred to in paragraph 5 above as the start of a trend towards restricting the number of official languages of their publications. The delays which occurred as a result of that decision were to a certain extent compounded by the impact of the policy implemented over the past few years, whereby contractual translation, the most economical mode of translation, has been used for a growing proportion of parliamentary documentation, which is subject to strict deadlines and requires priority processing. Delays in translation of publications have been cited by many respondents in the survey as a disincentive for producing publications in multiple languages. For those publications that are translated using funds budgeted by author departments, including public information publications such as the United Nations *Chronicle*, lack of resources has also been cited as a factor.

7. The above feedback will be fully taken into account when setting due dates for the translation of publications by conference services. Moreover, the concerns expressed by the General Assembly in paragraphs 10 and 11 of section B of resolution 52/214 would have to be reflected in the budget preparation and review process for the biennium 2000-2001.

II. Meeting records

8. Under paragraph 12 of section B of resolution 52/214, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to take steps to improve the quality and accuracy of meeting records in all six official languages through full reliance, in the preparation and translation of those records, on sound recordings and written texts of statements as they were delivered in the original languages, and to issue those records within a reasonable time-frame.

9. Summary records are drafted by précis-writing teams set up by the English, French, Spanish and, in fewer cases, Russian Translation Services of the Translation and Editorial Division. A précis-writing team usually consists of four persons. The main advantage of combining the two functions of translation and précis-writing is that they require similar language skills: The précis-writers covering a meeting are instructed to listen to the speakers in the original language, to the extent possible, rather than to the interpretation in their own language. They are also instructed to rely, subject to their availability, on written texts of statements in the original language for the drafting of the summary records.

10. With regard to the Arabic and Chinese languages, the very limited capacity within the Translation and Editorial Division for translation from those languages into the other four official languages of the General Assembly has precluded coverage of meetings by Arabic and Chinese teams. For the same reason, it is more the exception than the rule that précis-writers should have the language skills required to listen to statements made by Arabic and Chinese delegations in their respective languages. As a result, such statements may be summarized on the basis of their interpretation into one of the other four languages, before being retranslated into Arabic or Chinese for the use of delegations working in those languages. In the process, significant discrepancies or even inaccuracies may occur between the original statement and its rendition in the summary record issued in the same language.

11. In order to remedy the situation, a pilot project has been undertaken, starting with the first resumed session of the Fifth Committee from 9 to 27 March 1998. Under that project, translators from the Arabic Translation Service, selected for their drafting abilities and their familiarity with financial and administrative matters, have been closely associated with the drafting of summary records of the Fifth Committee. Using the sound recordings of statements delivered in Arabic, they prepare summaries of those statements in the original language for translation into English or French, as a relay for translation into other languages and subsequent incorporation in the summary record of the meeting. In those cases where the capacity of the French or English Translation Services for translation from Arabic into French or English is fully committed to other tasks, the same Arabic translators can prepare draft summaries in English, subject to editing and revision by the head of the précis-writing team. Similarly, when written texts of statements in Arabic are obtained from delegations, the Arabic translators assigned to Fifth Committee précis-writing work summarize them in Arabic for further translation or, exceptionally, in English or French, subject to editing and revision.

12. This project, which will be extended through the year, will be the subject of an overall assessment in the light of the feedback received from Arabic-speaking delegations. If the arrangement is deemed to be satisfactory, it will be extended over time and in scope to cover the other Main Committees of the General Assembly and the participation of the Chinese Translation Service.

13. As to the time-frame for the issuance of the summary records, it is a fact that over the past years, delays of up to a year have occurred between the time when a meeting was held and the issuance of the relevant summary record. While the drafting of a summary record

by the précis-writing team usually takes place within two days of the meeting, the scheduling of the translation of the original summary record into the other official languages of the General Assembly has been affected by conflicting priorities. In January 1998, a group of translators and revisers with the appropriate experience and skills was assigned the task of translating, both in-house and contractually, the summary records of meetings of the just completed main part of the General Assembly session. Assigning a "separate track" for the processing of summary records on a higher priority basis, as requested by the General Assembly, has made it possible to issue all Main Committee records of the main part of the fifty-second session of the General Assembly, including those of the Fifth Committee, by the end of May 1998. A similar approach will be followed from now on, and it is expected that a deadline of four months after the end of a session can be maintained on a regular basis for the issuance of the relevant summary records.

14. Under paragraph 16 of section B of resolution 52/214, the General Assembly further requested the Secretary-General to ensure that summary records are translated into all six official languages concurrently. The "separate track" approach to the translation of summary records referred to above has allowed Conference Services to apply strictly the rule of simultaneous distribution in all six languages to the summary records of the Main Committees during the four-month period following the end of the main part of the fifty-second session of the General Assembly. That rule will continue to be applied consistently henceforth.

15. Under paragraph 13 section B of resolution 52/214, the General Assembly also requested the Secretary-General to ensure, *inter alia*, that the summary records of the Fifth Committee, given the technical complexity of the subject matter, are prepared by experienced language staff who are thoroughly familiar with current administrative and financial developments in the Organization. The teams of précis-writers assigned to the servicing of the Fifth Committee during the main part of any session of the General Assembly consist of one reviser and three translators who have specialized for a number of years in translating or revising the parliamentary documentation of the Fifth Committee and other subsidiary organs of the General Assembly dealing with administrative and budgetary matters, such as the Committee for Programme and Coordination and the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (ACABQ). In addition, the members of those teams have, as a rule, considerable experience of précis-writing in that Committee. Where it has proved necessary to assign temporary staff to the Fifth Committee teams during the main part of the session, every effort has been made to make use of retirees who have extensive experience of administrative and budgetary matters. It has not always been possible, however, to follow this practice consistently for the resumed sessions of the Fifth Committee. In recent years, these sessions have been scheduled for periods when reliance on temporary staff is subject to limitations and when some of the Fifth Committee specialists were on mission or annual leave or were performing other assignments. As a result, it has been necessary on occasion to assign less experienced members of the permanent staff to cover meetings of the Fifth Committee. These staff members have, of course, been provided with all necessary guidance and advice by the more experienced members of the team, and, in every case, the reviser or team monitor has been a Fifth Committee specialist. In response to the concern recently expressed by the General Assembly, it has furthermore been decided that all efforts should be made to ensure that at least one and preferably two of the team members, in addition to the head of the team, should be selected among the small group of translators specialized in the subject matters of the Fifth Committee.

III. Timeliness and quality of translation

16. Under a number of paragraphs of section B of resolution 52/214, the General Assembly expressed concerns relating to the translation of documents into the official languages, which can all be subsumed into the following requirement: the translation of United Nations documentation must be faster and, at the same time, the quality of translation must be improved. Thus, under paragraph 10, the General Assembly, *inter alia*, expressed deep concern about the delay in the translation of official documents. In paragraph 14, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to continue to improve and accelerate the accurate translation of documents into the official languages, giving special significance to the quality of translation. In paragraph 15, it stressed the need to strengthen the monitoring of contractual translations to ensure that they meet the quality requirements for United Nations documents. Also, in paragraphs 18 and 19, the General Assembly expressed deep concern that the limits to self-revision had not been kept at a level that would ensure a high quality of translation and requested the Secretary-General to reinstate the post of reviser in the six official languages.

17. At the outset, it may be useful to point out in that connection that, in many instances, the late issuance of documentation is attributable not to Conference Services, but to late submission of material by author departments, and that inaccuracies in the final language versions are not all translation mistakes, as they are often traced to other stages of document processing.

18. It remains to be said that, over the years, the increase in the volume of parliamentary documentation and concomitant decrease in the resources of all translation services led to more reliance on methods of work allowing for higher productivity and, as a result, a reduction in the delay in the translation of documents. Unless corrective measures are taken to ensure that a high quality of translation is maintained, however, the benefits derived from an extensive application of these methods are more than offset by a lessening in the overall quality of translation. This is the case for the increased reliance on self-revision and on the night shift system. The current challenge is therefore to find and implement adjustments to those methods of work which will allow for improvements in both the quality and the timeliness of the issuance of translations, two objectives that do not have to be contradictory.

A. Self-revision[1]

19. Before 1981, the traditional method of having original texts translated initially by relatively junior language staff, the translators, and then revised by more senior and more experienced members of the translation services, the revisers, was the only method used at the United Nations. The introduction of "self-revision" was intended, *inter alia*, to accelerate the production of translated texts. Under that system, self-revising translators are expected to take a second critical look at their own initial drafts, thus obviating the need for further review at a distinct "revision" stage. However, as noted with remarkable candour in a report submitted at a session of the Inter-Agency Meeting on Language Arrangements, Documentation and Publications (IAMLADP) in July 1997, self-revision is a euphemism for "no revision" and it is clear that there must be limits in terms of who is entrusted with self-revision and what material is suitable for self-revision in order to avoid a negative impact on quality.

20. In that connection, it will be recalled that when ACABQ, in 1980, approved self-revision as a new translation mode, it was agreed that the percentage of the material so

processed would not exceed 45 per cent. This limitation was based on the new staffing structure of translation services, with a higher ratio of P-4/P-5 posts to P-3 posts, as well as on the understanding that sensitive documents, including resolutions of the principal organs of the United Nations and most of the Security Council documentation would always need to be revised and that, for material suitable for self-revision, only translators and revisers with the necessary experience and training could be expected to deliver self-revised translations meeting quality standards.

21. At Headquarters, the average rate of self-revision over the period from April 1997 to March 1998 was 47.8 per cent, not far from the ratio recommended by the ACABQ and the General Assembly. At Geneva and Vienna, corresponding averages are 61.8 and 64.4 per cent, respectively. However, it must be stressed that much higher rates have, until recently, been experienced in the various translation services at Headquarters and elsewhere during peak workload periods, in excess of 70 per cent in some services. Within the limitations owing to the volume and the deadlines of the workload, systematic efforts have been made therefore to ensure that sensitive or complex texts continue to be revised and that appropriate emphasis be placed on the revising function. In that connection, an analysis of the individual workload of self-revising translators at the P-4 level and senior revisers at the P-5 level at Headquarters over the same period (April 1997-March 1998) has shown that the share of straight revision work was roughly 40 per cent for the former and 61 per cent for the latter. The job description for P-4 staff has been revised in order to reflect the importance of the revising function and the functional title has been amended from "self-revising translator" to "reviser/self-revising translator". All posts at the P-4 level have been reclassified accordingly, and the distribution of assignments reflects these changes.

22. At the same time, a number of measures have been taken to reconcile quality requirements and a sustained high rate of self-revision, particularly in the areas of training and quality control. Special attention has been given to the training for self-revision of relatively experienced translators at the P-3 level. Taking into account their academic backgrounds and demonstrated areas of strength after a few years of experience, they are "specialized" in several subject matters. Subject to consistently satisfactory performance, they are asked to produce self-revised translations, which are subject to quality control by revisers and senior revisers. Systematic feedback is provided in the form of occasional corrections to their translations and one-on-one discussions with revisers. Translators at the P-3 level and revisers/self-revising translators at the P-4 level have increasingly been given the opportunity to expand and/or improve their language skills by attending courses of study at various universities. Thus, in the summer of 1998, some 20 members of the New York translation services at those levels have been selected to attend courses at universities in France, Jordan, Russia and Spain. Finally, in some translation services, seminars or group discussions have been organized to increase awareness of the requirements of delegations.

23. In the area of quality control, a number of measures have been continued or expanded to improve the quality of self-revised translation. The production of relatively inexperienced self-revisers is systematically monitored by senior staff and in some cases subject to a "peer review", which allows translators who are relatively new to self-revision to share among themselves the experience they are gradually acquiring. Quality control is not applied only to the production of new self-revisers, however. In all services, the Chief and the senior staff spot-check all self-revised texts, including those by relatively experienced translators. Furthermore, when a long document is split among several self-revising translators, a necessity when short deadlines have to be met, a senior reviser is normally assigned the task of reading the entire translated text, with a view to ensuring consistency in terminology and style in particular.

24. Finally, quality control for contractual translation has become more systematic. Using a standard format, the translation services evaluate selected jobs done contractually and rate them for accuracy, style, terminology, grammar, use of references, attention to detail and overall quality. Some 25 quality control reports were filed for the production covering the period from 1 September 1997 to 30 June 1998 and, as a follow-up to the evaluations, the name of one contractual translator was deleted from the roster and four warnings were issued. It is planned to continue and expand such quality controls of contractual translation, as far as revision capacity constraints allow.

B. Night shift

25. One way to expedite the production of translations is by allocating the work to night shifts. That procedure is relied upon in particular for the processing overnight and distribution the next day of documentation generated by the Security Council and other intergovernmental bodies, including draft reports, working papers and draft resolutions. Urgent requests for translation of correspondence addressed to the Office of the Secretary-General are also accommodated through the work of the night shift. On an average day, between 15 and 30 pages of documentation are received between 3 p.m. and 7.30 p.m. for immediate processing. The number of translators/revisers normally assigned to the night shift varies from service to service, and according to the workload. During the main part of the session of the General Assembly, all translation services increase the size of their night shifts to reflect the increase in the number of overnight rush jobs. At other times of the year, depending on advance notice from the submitting departments, night teams can also be increased as necessary. There are limitations to the strengthening of capacity at night, however, since it is achieved at the expense of the capacity during the day, and the overall performance of the translation services can be affected if a certain balance is not observed. Ideally, the night teams should be headed by an experienced senior reviser at the P-5 level, include at least one reviser/self-revising translator at the P-4 level and a balance of translators at the P-2/P-3 level.

26. Most cases of translation errors or inadequate translations relate to work performed during the night shift. Indeed, organizing the work under these conditions represents a real challenge. All the jobs are urgent and when a problem arises the reviser or translator cannot rely on guidance from the submitting office, on support from the Terminology and Reference Section or, more simply, on the advice from colleagues who may have more experience or more knowledge in specific fields of activities. Moreover, at times of extremely heavy workload, the members of the night shift must overcome fatigue and remain alert and fully operational, sometimes until the early hours of the morning. The risks of lapses in quality are thus naturally multiplied, as translators who are under considerable pressure to deliver the required volume of work may not have enough time to check the quality of their translations. At the same time, the material which is processed under these conditions has the highest visibility, including reports dealt with by the Security Council, draft resolutions for the General Assembly and diplomatic correspondence for the eyes of the Secretary-General.

27. A number of measures are being taken to adjust the working methods applied to the night shift so as to ensure that quality standards are met at all times. They include improving the accuracy of the projections of workload through better communication with submitting offices with a view to adjusting the size and the composition of the night shifts on a day-to-day basis; assigning to the night shift only translators and revisers who can function effectively under pressure and have a broad knowledge of specialized fields of activity, as

well as the capacity to translate from as many languages other than English as possible; adjusting the scheduling of the night shift on an ad hoc basis to take into account the timing of the submission of the documentation in order to minimize the "fatigue" factor of the members of the team; and encouraging them to rely on all terminology and reference material available electronically to make up for the absence of support from the Terminology and Reference Section during the evening and night hours. However, irrespective of the improvements generated by such adjustments, it will remain essential to monitor closely the flow of work submitted with overnight deadlines to ensure a high quality of translation.

IV. Introduction of new technologies

28. Under paragraph 17 of section B of resolution 52/214, the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to continue his efforts, where appropriate, to introduce new technologies such as machine-assisted translation and common terminology databases.

29. The infrastructure required to allow all translators in New York to take advantage of recent technological innovations is finally in place: as of April 1998, some 300 powerful computers equipped with 19 inch monitors had been delivered, using funds appropriated by the General Assembly in the 1996-1997 budget. Thus, all translators and revisers have state-of-the-art work stations and the networking of the latter is now being completed.

30. As a result, all translators will have direct access to the Optical Disk System (ODS) where the documentation and resolutions of major United Nations organs (the General Assembly, the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council) are posted. This provides them with a wealth of reference material, which they can retrieve using a full-text search facility. That access has been extended to contractual translators, who can now consult ODS free of charge over the Internet. More systematic reliance on ODS should contribute to the improvement in the quality and the consistency of translation.

31. Access to terminology databases has likewise been expanded and facilitated, making it possible for all language staff to fully utilize all terminology resources. The multilingual terminology database maintained by the Terminology and Reference Section, in cooperation with the individual translation services, has been expanded over the last year to provide more extensive language coverage of all the topics considered by the Organization. More powerful PC-based systems have been integrated into the daily work of the terminologists and most of the database maintenance and data collection functions have been moved from the mainframe to the new PC platforms, thus enabling terminologists to update the terminology database directly on a daily basis.

32. In addition to terminology and referencing files stored in the database maintained by the Terminology and Reference Section, translators can now access electronic versions of terminology bulletins and notes issued at Headquarters, the United Nations Office at Geneva and the United Nations Office at Vienna, as well as terminology material made available in electronic form by United Nations agencies such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and non-United Nations organizations such as the European Union, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development and the Council of Europe under an exchange arrangement agreed to at the 1996 session of the Inter-Agency Meeting on Language Arrangements, Documentation and Publications. It is planned to coordinate further shared terminology material and to utilize CD-ROM technology for the use of in-house and contractual translators.

33. Finally, computer-assisted translation (CAT) is in the process of being introduced. Based on preliminary research conducted in 1997, a Working Group on Technological Innovations, comprising revisers and translators from all six translation services and a senior terminologist, has carried out extensive testing and evaluation of four software packages since the beginning of 1998. It will be recalled that such software makes it possible to automate part of the preparatory work involved in any translation, namely the identification and retrieval of previously translated material and of relevant terminology through the use of "translation memories" and terminology databases. Before the evaluation was completed in July 1998, a visit to various units of the Commission of the European Union involved in the implementation of this technology took place in May with a view, in particular, to identifying organizational and documentation management pre-conditions, which appear essential for successful implementation of CAT. While recognizing that no single product currently on the market meets all United Nations requirements, the Working Group has made recommendations reflecting a detailed analysis of each product's features and functions and their relevance to the specific requirements of translation at the United Nations. At the time of this writing, a final decision on the selection of a software package is being made, taking into account broader considerations, in particular the potential for integration with other technologies, such as voice recognition, the degree of commitment of prospective vendors for customized support and further development of their products and the need to protect the investment of the United Nations in building translation memories. The next stage, namely the application of CAT, is expected to start in the fourth quarter of 1998 and to cover the rest of the biennium. It will involve a group of thirty translators, i.e. six teams of five translators from each translation service, each headed by a team leader, with the full involvement of the staff in the Terminology and Reference Section. The main purposes of the initial implementation phase will be:

(a) To establish an enhanced document management system, which will gradually eliminate existing gaps in the flow of documents in electronic form;

(b) To determine a "CAT suitability threshold", i.e. the percentage of previously translated material a document must contain to lend itself to efficient application of translation memory technology;

(c) To assess, based on the above, the proportion of United Nations documents to which CAT may be meaningfully applied;

(d) To gradually build domain-specific translation memories;

(e) To develop, through intensive training in cooperation with the software vendor, a core of translators with in-depth knowledge of the CAT software package, who will be able to train colleagues when the CAT project is expanded.

Notes

[1] The text of paragraphs 19 to 23 of the present report also appears in the report of the Secretary-General submitted pursuant to the requests contained in paragraphs 13 to 15 of section III of General Assembly resolution 52/220 (A/53/221, section II, Self-revision).